

The Burning of Bedford Village History re-examined

Evelyne H. Ryan

As you look around the Village Green today, all the buildings that you see were built after the Revolutionary War. Although the town was founded in 1680, none of the houses from the original settlement remain because in July of 1779, the village, with the exception of one house that was later torn down, was burned.

This Sunday, July 11, marks the 225th Anniversary of the Burning of Bedford Village. Very little was written about the burning and documentary evidence is scarce of exactly when the burning took place and who was responsible. For many years history told a tale that was not always accurate and that changed with the persistence of historical researchers and the discovery of documents that either proved or disproved several theories. The story of the burning of Bedford is one that has benefited from “revisionist” history. Here are the facts as we know them today.

On July 2, 1779, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton under the order of Sir Henry Clinton, British Commander, led 360 mounted British and Hessian troops on a lightning attack from Mile Square near Yonkers through Bedford to Pound Ridge. There, Tarleton planned to surprise Col. Elisha Sheldon’s 2nd Continental Dragoons and capture Col. Sheldon. However, Sheldon was waiting for Tarleton and with the support of the militia eventually pursued Tarleton and his troops to what is now Mount Kisco. Tarleton did report burning a few houses that day, one in Bedford belonging to Benjamin Hayes because the colonists persisted in firing upon Tarleton from their houses.

After the attack on July 2, George Washington sent more troops to Bedford but these troops were quickly sent to Connecticut when the British mounted a large attack on the coast. On July 11, 1779, while the American forces were engaged in Connecticut, 400 enemy horsemen came up to Bedford and burned every house except one. Military reports and newspapers told very little of this raid, only that Bedford was burned that day.

Eyewitness accounts taken down by John McLain MacDonald from 1844 to 1851 were conflicting at best and accused five different men of leading the raid on Bedford. Those men were Lt. Col. Tarleton, Lt. John Graves Simcoe, Major Mansfield Bearmore, and Col. James DeLancey; the fifth person accused was Col. James Holmes, a Bedford man who had served in the American army but later changed his allegiance.

Bedford Town Historian, Donald Marshall, wrote in his address on the 200th anniversary of the burning, “Despite these discrepancies as to who were in the enemy forces on July 11th, there is surprising agreement about what the enemy did that day. When the blow struck, there were no defending troops in or to the south of Bedford Village, Col. (Stephen) Moylan’s Dragoons having set out for Connecticut the night before. Militia units were posted east of the village near the Post Road and the Pound Ridge Road, with lookouts on Guard Hill and Bates’ Hill, the hill behind Historical Hall. Remember the countryside was not wooded then, so these lookouts could see for miles.

Published in the Record Review Friday, July 9, 2004

The enemy approached Bedford by way of South Bedford Road, Baldwin Road and Guard Hill Road. When the lookout on Guard Hill saw them coming down Snyder's Hill he fired his pistol three times. The lookout on Bates' Hill made a tragic mistake; he at first thought the mounted men were Moylan's troops – Moylan's men wore green uniforms; so did some of the enemy outfits – and when he realized they were not a friendly force, it was too late.”

The lookout on Bates Hill was Stephen Ambler, a South Salem resident, but a descendent of one of Bedford's original settlers. When he realized his mistake, he tried to escape but was shot down and killed a little beyond the Greenwich Road.

Historical records up until 1878 say only that Bedford was burned; nothing was reported about who ordered the burning or who was in charge of the troops. Confusion was created when Rev. Lea Luquer, in a speech before the Westchester County Historical Society, made reference to a newspaper article printed on July 19 that reported on Tarleton's raid on July 2. Not knowing about the raid on July 11, Luquer assumed that July 2 was also the day Bedford was burned. Historians followed suit and began reporting that the village was burned on July 2 and Tarleton was responsible. Even in the revised Bolton's "History of Westchester County" this erroneous assumption was repeated.

In 1974, Dorothy Humphreys Hinitt and Frances Riker Duncombe published "The Burning of Bedford" in which they proved that Bedford was burned on July 11, 1779, not on the 2, but they remained uncertain about who led the cavalry into town on that fateful day. Since everyone had learned that the village was burned on July 11 and not on July 2, the question of whether Tarleton was also in Bedford on July 11 remained. Mr. Marshall continued to research this question and found absolutely no evidence that Tarleton was anywhere near Bedford on July 11. Marshall also concluded that Tarleton's personality was such that if he was responsible for burning an entire town, he would have bragged about it – and no such reports exist even among his own diaries.

In anticipation of a reenactment as a part of Bedford's tricentennial celebration in 1980, Ronald Reynolds took up where Mr. Marshall had left off in trying to discover who was in charge of the troops that burned Bedford. He eventually discovered the diaries of Archibald Robertson, a member of the Royal Engineers and a close associate of Sir Henry Clinton. In the diaries it was learned that Clinton had ordered a surprise attack on Bedford in hopes of capturing Moylan.

The cavalry that was assembled consisted of members of Tarleton's British Legion, Lt. Col. John Simcoe's Queen's Rangers, Samuel Birch's 17th Light Dragoons, Bearmore's Refugees, part of DeLancey's Horse and some German Jaegers. The Cavalry was placed under the command of Lt. Col. Birch. Arriving in Bedford on July 11, they found that Moylan had left for Connecticut the night before. In their frustration at finding no troops and their anger at having been fired upon nine days earlier during the Pound Ridge raid, they burned Bedford.

And so, 201 years after the burning, historians were able to determine that Bedford was burned on July 11, 1779 by 400 cavalymen led by Col. Samuel Birch. More details of the events of July 11 and the documents that led to this more accurate and complete history are available at the Bedford Historical Society.